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### **The White Clay Immersion School**

When the White Clay Immersion School began in 2003; There were approximately 7 Elder Aaniiih or White Clay (Gros Ventre) language speakers that were alive. Unless immediate action was taken, the language faced extinction. Once lost, the Aaniiih (White Clay) language cannot be recovered, and the implications of this loss for the survival, identity and well being of the Aaniiih people are enormous. The language carries the traditions, life-ways, philosophies and values of the Aaniiih people's unique and distinct culture. Language and cultural are inseparable, and the loss of one will cause irreparable damage to the other.

To prevent this tragedy, Aaniiih Nakoda College ( Fort Belknap College) collaborated with Native language experts and community members to develop a "Speaking White Clay Comprehensive Plan for the Revitalization of the Tribal Language" in 2000. Drawing upon scholarly research and first-hand experience, the plan concluded that, "The most important goal of the revitalization program is to produce children speakers of the tribal language." To achieve this goal, the plan advocated the establishment of an immersion school and outlined the general methods, strategies and resources need to produce fluent-speaking children in an immersion school setting. The establishment of the White Clay (Immersion) School in 2002 represented the college's and communities initial efforts to implement this plan and achieve the goal of revitalizing the White Clay language.

The White Clay Immersion School now operates within the context of educational self-determination established by Aaniiih Nakoda College and has extend this innovative and successful model to the elementary school level (K-8th grades) through the use of culturally-based curricula imbedded within the context of Native language instruction. The White Clay Immersion School provides a learning environment where students acquire proficiency in the White Clay language and gain the cognitive competencies and personal-cultural identity that the local public school systems have been unable to provide.

In the spring of 2011 the White Clay Immersion School graduated its first cohort of 8<sup>th</sup> graders that attended the immersion school since kindergarten. They scored higher on the COMPASS test than most of the incoming high school students in math, reading and writing. This is attributed to learning their language, the academic and holistic environment they have at the White Clay Immersion School, and their high self esteem. The school has begun 2 new cohorts of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders and now have 8<sup>th</sup> grade mentors for them. Enrollment for the current school year (2011/12) is at 24 students.

Fort Belknap Reservation is the only place in the world where the White Clay language is spoken. In addition to the uniqueness of the language, the White Clay Immersion School is unique because it is based at a tribal college. Over the past 40 years, the tribal college movement has led the fight for educational self-determination and the creation of tribal college-immersion school partnerships.

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movement for Indian education. White Clay Immersion School establishes the precedent for this innovative model.

### **Aaniiih Nakoda College (Ft. Belknap College)**

In the early 1980s, the Fort Belknap Education Department recognized that off-reservation institutions were not adequately meeting the post secondary educational needs of Fort Belknap residents. They recommended that the Fort Belknap Indian Community charter its own tribal college to provide these educational services in a manner that would be responsive to local needs and promote the cultural heritage of the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Nakoda (Assiniboiné) people. Acting on this recommendation, the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council chartered Aaniiih Nakoda College in 1984. The college's unique dual mission reflects the initial concerns of its founders to provide post secondary educational opportunities that will help maintain the cultural integrity of the Fort Belknap tribes and prepare individuals for successful lives in "American technological society."

### **Fort Belknap Indian Reservation**

The White Clay Immersion School project serves the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and surrounding communities in north central Montana. The reservation is the home of the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Nakoda (Assiniboiné) Tribes. There are 5,232 enrolled members of the Fort Belknap Indian Community, 2,959 of who reside on the reservation. Fort Belknap Agency, which is located three miles southeast of Harlem, Montana, is the site of the College and the White Clay Immersion School and serves as the major residential community on the northern end of the reservation. Recent census data show that Fort Belknap's population is young and growing. The median age on the reservation is 23.5 (compared to 37.5 for the entire State of Montana), and 45.4% of Fort Belknap residents are under 20 years of age. In stark contrast to regional trends that show declines in rural populations across Montana's northern tier, census data show the reservation population increasing by 19.1% over the past ten years. Economically, Fort Belknap ranks among the poorest areas in Montana and the United States. Fort Belknap's average annual unemployment rate exceeds 70%, and census data show that 40.3% of Fort Belknap's families live below the federal poverty level.

The White Clay Immersion School is working to change the above situation by counteracting their negative impacts through the restoration of language and the creation of an effective educational system for children that will produce future community leaders.